

JACK.

BY A CLERGYMAN'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

One charming July day, some five and twenty years ago, there was a great gathering at the Bathursts' pretty little country house by the Suffolk coast; for the event of the morning had brought many friends about them, who appeared to be in no hurry to disperse even after luncheon was over. On the contrary, they loitered about the garden till presently the gentlemen strolled off to the little farm, which was Henry Bathurst's summer amusement, and then the ladies of the party grouped themselves under a splendid chestnut-tree, round the very centre of attraction, the hero of the occasion, the Baby!

A solemn-eyed five-week-old beauty reposing in perfect contentment on his mother's lap, sleepily blinking out of his nest of fluffy Shetland wraps, accepting unmoved the feminine admiration and flattery lavished on him. There he lay, this little John Bathurst, whose christening that morning had set the whole village astir, while he himself was blissfully unconscious of the commotion he was making in the world. His dimples, his mouth (about the size of a shilling), his golden downy hair, his very remarkable nose (exactly like his papa's)—all in turn were admired and examined, and favorably compared with those of every other baby ever known. And even his little pink feet were exhibited, and since there is nothing prettier than a baby's feet, except, perhaps, his hands, this was the very climax of the show, after which the small mortal was carried off by his jealous nurse, and his mother left in peace, supporting her maternally dignity without his assistance.

"Well, it isn't every baby that has so much made of him as this one," laughed a mother of five. "Let's hope his good luck will last all his life through."

"It's better to be born lucky than rich, they say, but your boy is to be both, apparently," said another lady. "Though," she added, rather aside to the young mother, "I dare say you would willingly have dispensed with some of the riches. Your husband must have been shocked at his brother's death, I'm sure."

"Oh, dreadfully!" answered Mrs. Bathurst. "He was only ill such a short time, and he and my husband were so much attached to each other. To tell the truth, I was a little vexed at baby being named 'John,' of course. I wanted him to be named 'Henry,' but my husband had set his heart on calling him after his brother, so I had to give in."

"And that's you who were always going to have your own way," merrily broke in Mrs. Bathurst's old schoolfellow, bridesmaid and baby's godmother, Kathleen Hughes, with a shake of the head, signifying how great was the thraldom of matrimony.

"Oh, I didn't mind so much as to make a very great point of it," retorted her friend, happily confident in her own power. "If I had, of course my husband would have done as I wished."

"Oh, is that to be the rule of your establishment, madam?" her put in another very old friend, no other than the family doctor, who had known Mrs. Bathurst since she herself was no bigger than her son and heir.

"No; don't let me frighten you ladies away. I am only just come to say good-bye, for I must be off on my afternoon rounds; and your good husband, Mr. Bathurst, is taking the gentlemen yonder to look at his hay, so I couldn't stop with them."

"I'm afraid he will make his head ache dreadfully in this blazing sunshine," said the wife, looking anxiously across the fields.

"Headache! Why, he doesn't often indulge in that, does he?" said Dr. Greaves.

"Not very often, only as a rule, he never takes wine at lunch, and when he does take it at dinner, he seldom goes out afterwards. If he does, he is sure to have a headache."

"Oh, he has to be careful, has he?" said the doctor, rather musingly. "Well, that's a very good thing." Then, seeing his hostess's look of astonishment, and noting that the other ladies had left them alone, he added—"Don't be offended, my dear child, or fancy that I see the least danger of your husband's following in his poor brother's wake, because I don't. But honestly, I am always glad to hear of a little wine giving a man a headache; I look upon it as one of nature's safeguards to keep him off the habit of taking too much."

"But, doctor, my husband is so strictly moderate. I'm sure he does not deserve the least bit of headache for the ridiculously small quantity he ever drinks."

"Then I'll revoke my hard-hearted speech and apologise for seeming such a boor. With all his good sense and good principles, as I said before, I think your husband is safe, but I've known the Bathursts for fifty years, remember, and know very well what wine did for his father and brother, so you mustn't mind my making a remark when you tell me what it does for your husband. What's this?"—as Kathleen Hughes, a very special favorite of the old doctor's, came smiling up with a laden tray. "What, Master Baby's christening presents? Dear me, what a fine thing it is to be an only son! And pray, whose gift is this?" taking up a beautiful silver mug, and turning it about for inspection.

"Oh, that is from baby's godpapa," said Miss Kathleen with a conscious blush.

"Baby's godpapa! And who may that be?" said Dr. Greaves, pretending ignorance.

"Why, Mr. Conway," says Kathleen with a beautiful air of indifference.

"Oh, indeed! Mr. Conway is it," says the wicked old doctor. "Well, it's very handsome indeed. Let's hope he'll have equally handsome ones given to his own children when he—Why, my dear, where are you off to?" for Kathleen seized the tray and decamped, much to her friend's amusement.

"Is this true?" asked Dr. Greaves. "Am I going to lose all you young people I and is young Conway going to carry off Kathleen?"

"Yes, by-and-by," said Mrs. Bathurst, complacently—the gentleman was her husband's friend, and the match was one after her heart—but he is not rich, and they will wait, I fancy, three or four years."

"Won't do them any harm. I'm glad she is not going yet. Well, he has managed to spare his godson something worth having, and I'll give you something to match, only I'm not sure you'll care to take my offering."

"What is it, doctor?"

"A piece of advice."

"Well?"

"Teach your little Christian to drink nothing but water out of it."

"Doctor!" incredulously.

"Ah, you may look, but I mean it. You won't suspect an old man like me running after fashions. It is not from fashion, but facts, that I have worked out this notion of mine and I wish I'd held the idea forty years ago as strongly as I do now. If you never begin giving that little creature strong drinks, he'll never want them, and considering his forbears, it will be much the safest plan. Now good bye really." And away went the worthy old doctor, leaving his hostess just a trifle annoyed by his plain speech.

Of course the incident was repeated to Mr. Bathurst, but he, a most steady, even-minded man, many years his wife's senior, smiled away her shadow of vexation, and reassured her mind, already anxious for her baby's future.

"I think we can manage to take care of our boy, Amy, without going to any such extremes as Dr. Greaves proposes. My poor father, we all know, did think too much of his cellar, but it was more the fashion among country squires then than it is now. Probably by the time little Jack grows up the habit will have less hold on society. At any rate, we'll be very careful always. Suppose we go and look at him?"

I wonder how often in long after years, the tender mother, who leant so lovingly over her child's cot that night, recalled the afternoon's counsel, lightly received, carelessly set aside, and echoed out of an aching heart the old country doctor's words—

"Considering his forbears, it would have been the safest plan."

CHAPTER II.

The three or four years suggested by Mrs. Bathurst shortened into two, for at the end of that time Mr. Conway, who was in one of the Government offices had the good luck to be unexpectedly promoted, and there was no longer need to delay his marriage with Kathleen Hughes.

Thenceforth Eastham only knew her as a visitor, and little Jack Bathurst missed his best nurse and playfellow sadly. The first summer after her departure they passed in the country, but the summer after that made up for all his disappointment, for there came back not only "old Kathleen," as he politely called his godmother, but a

young creature of the same name, a sweet little live doll, which became at once the object of his youthful devotion. For of toys of this description Jack had none. He was the only child still, and therefore the advent of this baby girl marked a new era in his life, and for years formed the special charm of their sojourn in the Eastham home.

The time when, with more vigor than prudence, he rocked his helpless guest out of her cradle, and, terrified at his rash act, ran off, leaving her to be found, a trifle suffocated, but exceedingly warm and happy under a heap of blankets; his many polite but ill-judged efforts to feed his little friend with uncooked vegetables, or sour apple, or some such delicacy—efforts invariably resulting in half choking her; that never-to-be-forgotten morning when he essayed to carry her downstairs, and of course they both tumbled from top to bottom, but by some miracle were neither of them hurt—all these, and scores more such tricks, made their summer visits very memorable, and the theme of many and many a talk in after years between the mothers.

These two, as well as their husbands, kept up their old friendship as time went by, and as Jack and little Kathleen grew out of childhood into vigorous, healthy boy and girlhood, perhaps it is not to be wondered at if the thought often crossed the minds of, at any rate, the two wives, that it would be pleasant for these young people to form a closer bond, and change their present ties into those of kinship. Such a thing seemed so very possible, or even probable, that these matchmaking mothers exchanged opinions on the subject, and by the time Jack and Kathleen had reached the mature ages of thirteen and ten, had settled—ostensibly in joke, but with an under-current of real hope—that their children would make an admirable couple in another ten years time.

"Jack will be rich enough to satisfy Mr. Conway," laughingly determined Mrs. Bathurst, "and he can do whatever Kathleen and he chooses. If they like the country, his father will buy him more land here, or if he cares to take up a profession, they can live wherever they like best, and we old folks will follow them."

"Yes, and Frank and I will come too; so we shall make a sort of happy family," finished off Mrs. Conway. "Oh, do look at the children, they seem happy enough now!"

And as she spoke, she pointed from the window of the summer-house where they were sitting, to the boat coming along close by the shore, in which the two fathers were lazily permitting themselves to be rowed by their delighted boy and girl.

"Make haste, mother!" shouted Jack, as they glided past; "we shall be at the landing-steps, directly, and we're so hungry!"

"That means," said his smiling mother, "that we must make our way in to lunch. There," folding up her work, "I shall leave my things here, ready for to-morrow. I like being here better than in the house or on the open shore. My husband was talking of pulling this place down and building a larger one, but I love this little den! Jack was so fond of it when he was quite a baby, we called it, you remember, his nursery. While the cottage belongs to us this must stand, for the dear boy's sake."

Then they left the queer little many cornered room, papered with nursery pictures and littered with Jack's tools and toys, intending fully to spend their next morning there, but that next morning brought the Conways a sudden recall to London, and those two friends had no more happy hours in the little summer-house. After so many years of regular visits, it seemed strange that a very long interval should pass without these families meeting again. But so it was. Another step into a more important post gave Mr. Conway a longer holiday at a later season than the Bathursts generally remained in the country, and this was nearly always spent abroad, when his wife and Kathleen (she was an only child too) invariably went with him. Then Jack was at one of our large schools, and wanted rest and country air in the holidays, his father declared, so a London visit never formed part of their vacation programme, and the old intimacy was kept up chiefly by correspondence. But even this languished after a while, since, as time wore on, they had nothing but themselves and their one child each to write about, and concerning the latter it would have been too ridiculous, now they were really growing up, to send

backwards and forwards the comically affectionate messages with which at first they overburdened their parents' missives.

So Kathleen grew into young womanhood fully as charming and bright as her mother had been before her, but had now reached twenty, and for the last half of her life had not met her old companion, though there certainly lurked still in some corner of her heart a very warm liking for that same Jack.

His mother she had seen and Mr. Bathurst, too, during a flying visit to London, which they paid a year before; but the father was much aged, and looked a very different person to what she remembered, while his wife was still more strangely changed.

Their time together was certainly short, but three-quarters of it was not occupied, as once it would have been, by details of Jack's savings and doings.

On the contrary, a brief assertion that he had done exceedingly well at school, and would easily get his degree at Cambridge in October, was all that passed about him, and Mrs. Conway, taking fright at the idea that her friend might suspect her of too great a desire to carry out her old project, forbore making any special inquiries about her pet of former days.

Still Mrs. Bathurst did not seem at ease, and her eyes used to follow Kathleen about very wistfully, while a remark that broke from her, "Ah, if she were my daughter really!" seemed to say that the plan would have been as welcome as ever to her, though some unmentionable obstacle stood in the way of its fulfilment.

Her admiring praise of Kathleen, too, and warm parting from the girl, pointed to the wish being yet alive, so much so, that the old floating fancy took stronger hold of Mrs. Conway, and came well to the front when another proposal of marriage for her daughter brought up discussion on the matter between her and her husband. Kathleen's would be suitor had much to be said for him—something against him. He was certainly heartily in love with their child—that was quite right, but perfectly natural. He was fairly well born, a gentleman by position, an honorable man by nature; so far so good, but—

But he was a barrister with his fortune yet to make, though he had sufficient private means to satisfy modest young housekeepers; and then he was "afflicted with fancies." This is how Mr. Conway put it when, after Kathleen had gone off to bed one night, he and his wife deliberated over Mr. Ellis's letter and proposal.

"I'm not at all sure about his politics," mused Mr. Conway, "but perhaps that doesn't matter so much, but the man is quite daff on some points. Just imagine the absurdity of an individual who has his way to make taking up with this abstinence party. I don't like it. I don't care to associate myself with fanatics of any class. I don't believe Kathleen cares for him, and I'd much rather she didn't."

But Mrs. Conway was more cautious in expressing her opinion. It was a very right minded thing in her eyes to fall in love with Kathleen, and no person must be lightly condemned who had the good sense to do so.

She demurred, therefore, at her husband's protest, and averred that if that were the only thing against Mr. Ellis, she really didn't think it would signify much. He was very unobtrusive and quiet in his opinions.

"Quiet, do you call it?" exclaimed Mr. Conway. "Why, my dear, he was getting up a temperance lecture, or something of that sort, when I looked in at his rooms the other day, and he's going to deliver the rhodomontade at the schoolroom here one night soon! Do you call that being quiet? And I've heard him say over and over again—though that's before he began thinking of Kathleen, I suppose—that his household, whenever he had one, must be all of the same mind, for he never intended to have wine or anything of the sort in it! Now can you fancy Kathleen at the head of her table inviting our friends to unlimited drinks of cold water? Fudge!"

Judiciously forbearing from argument on a point she felt sure of being able to carry, if necessary, Mrs. Conway quietly let her husband talk himself out, and then unveiled her objections.

"Rupert Ellis is a very nice fellow, and many people would think Kathleen lucky to have him."

"Would they? Then let them have him themselves!" interposed Mr. Conway.